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ABSTRACT

Public "schools of choice" refers to a new trend in educational policy that involves various forms of competition and choice. The initiatives of individual states range from authorizing magnet schools to allowing parents to send children to neighboring school districts. What these programs have in common is that parents, as consumers of education, are given a choice in where to send their children. The state that has had the most success with public schools of choice is Minnesota, but Massachusetts has also experimented successfully with choice programs for about 20 years. In Pennsylvania, the school of choice option that has been used most often is that of magnet schools. Positive results have been achieved in some Pennsylvania cities, but should not be seen as the only answer to public school problems. Other states have implemented a variety of approaches, and their programs illustrate that the cost of funding public schools of choice depends on the size and scope of the program. Negative aspects of schools of choice that critics have examined are impacts on racial integration, the difficulty of administering programs and districts, and the impact on teachers. However, these issues can be addressed. Control of education should be given back to those who are closest to the schools, students, parents, and local school boards. (SLD)

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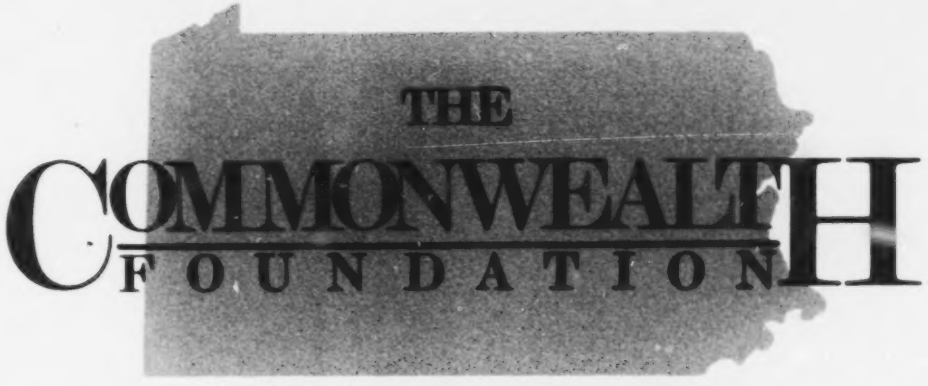

for Public Policy Alternatives

HOW "SCHOOLS OF CHOICE" CAN IMPROVE THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

An educational phenomenon is on the horizon in the United States that could revolutionize our nation's public school system by making it more accountable to parents, and more responsive to student needs. Commonly referred to as "public schools of choice," the concept introduces competitive influences into education by allowing parents flexibility over where to send their children within the public school system.

Parents make countless choices every day for their children, from what food they eat, to the programs they watch on television; but when it comes to one of the most important parental decisions, selecting their child's education, parents have very little say. Public schools of choice changes this.

Public schools of choice refers to a diverse new trend in education policy involving various forms of competition and choice. Individual states' initiatives vary from authorizing magnet schools, to encouraging high school juniors and seniors to take college courses, to allowing parents to send their children to neighboring school districts.

What is common in each program is that parents, as consumers of education, are given a choice in where to send their children as opposed to being restricted by their school district residence. At present, choice in education is largely limited to those parents with the ability to pay for alternatives. Upper income parents can choose to live in wealthy public school districts or send their children to private schools. For parents of low to moderate income levels, educational choices are often dictated by where they can afford to live. Private education is seldom affordable.

Decentralization of control over education produces a number of crucial benefits. The schools of choice movement injects diversification into the school system. Children, and their particular interests and abilities, become the focus of educational decisions. In the process, parents are given more discretion in their child's education. An added benefit of introducing competition into public education is that inferior public schools may be forced to improve quality in order to compete for students.

Making a quality education universally available has long been a cherished goal of our nation. The vast majority of Americans continue to believe in the importance of a strong public education system. However, increasing numbers of parents find the public school system antiquated and falling short of basic expectations. If given the choice, few parents would voluntarily send their children to a school where they believed they were receiving a second rate education.

By giving parents the option of deciding which public school to send their children to, schools which are not offering a quality education will be forced to deal with their problems or face a declining student body. As Massachusetts educator, Dr. Charles Glenn has said, public schools of choice allows "parents to vote with their children's feet!"[1]

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Somewhere along the way our public schools went astray. Local control of schools gave way to a centralized education establishment that thought it knew more about educating children than parents and communities did. Today, books on the decline of American education, such as **Cultural Literacy** and **The Closing of the American Mind**, make the best-seller lists.

Ironically, much of the current education policy in the United States was established by a desire to introduce more egalitarianism. The feeling was that America could build a more equitable society by granting rich and poor students equal access to a quality education. Yet, the group of students who have suffered the most from the education system's declining performance are the poor and disadvantaged. Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, said, "The condition of urban education remains a disgrace." He describes thousands of urban students who "crowd into dilapidated buildings and drift unrecognized from class to class."[2]

Another reason American education is failing is because it has refused to keep pace with changing world realities. The international movement toward government and economic reform involves a turning away from bureaucratic centralization toward greater reliance on market forces, individual incentives, and decentralized control. David Kearns, Chairman of Xerox Corporation, and co-author of a recent book on public education entitled **Winning the Brain Race** has described today's public education system as "a failed monopoly — bureaucratic, rigid and in unsteady control of dissatisfied captive markets."[3]

America is rapidly falling behind other industrial nations in educating its children, even though it spends more per capita on education than any other country. Without a reversal in quality, many fear that America cannot maintain its economic preeminence for long. What was once our nation's pride has become her shame.

Our current system is resulting in high drop out rates, growing numbers of at-risk children, increasing violence, and SAT scores well behind our Asian and European allies. The gravity of these problems has been well documented by countless education reports, and need not be fully recounted here.

COMPETITION & CHOICE: THE EXAMPLES OF MINNESOTA AND MASSACHUSETTS

Increasingly, states are coping with educational decline and parental dissatisfaction by completely reversing the policy of centralization and standardization. Dozens of states are granting parents a range of new choices within the public education system. Surprisingly, these reforms are not always meeting the opposition from the education establishment one might anticipate. With dissatisfaction running so deep, perhaps educators have little to lose by shifting more decision-making authority back to parents.

The state that has had the most success with public schools of choice is Minnesota. Under the leadership of Democratic Governor Rudy Perpich, the legislature passed a very progressive package of educational reform laws. Minnesota's law allows the following:[4]

Area Learning Centers offer an alternative education setting for students from 16 to 21 years of age. They are designed to meet specific student needs by offering, for example, academic and skill classes, trade and vocational training, work experience, and transition services which help students obtain additional education or employment.

A Post-Secondary Option Program provides funding for any 11th or 12th grade public school student to enroll full or part time in non-sectarian courses, providing the post secondary

institutions meet eligibility requirements.

The High School Graduation Incentive Program permits students of ages 12-21 who have not done well in one public school district to attend another public school outside their district, providing the receiving school has room and existing desegregation policies are not disrupted by the transfer.

An Enrollment Option Program allows parents of 5-18 year old children to transfer students to public school districts outside their resident district if both districts approve.

Massachusetts has also experimented very successfully with choice programs for about twenty years. Choice was first introduced as a tool to promote equity and integration in the public school system. Today, there are over 60,000 students attending schools of choice in Massachusetts' cities. Over 3,500 minority students participate in a highly successful interdistrict transfer program.[5]

The *New York Times* recently reported the success of a Cambridge, Massachusetts choice program started in 1981. The number of students enrolled in public schools outside their immediate districts increased from 20 to 40 percent. In addition, the percentage of students attending public schools rather than private or parochial schools increased from 70 to 90 percent, proving that public schools can successfully compete for quality students.[6]

Dr. Charles Glenn, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Office of Educational Equity, and a nationally recognized expert on schools of choice, has identified some of the developments which produced the state's schools of choice program.[7]

The impetus for change first came when parents of minority students began demanding greater choice for their children by seeking available classroom seats in Boston and other cities, and then in suburban districts as well. The state board of education was soon forced to increase choice, particularly when the policy was seen as helpful to integration.

The first step was to develop several urban magnet schools on a pilot basis. The Massachusetts Legislature offered financial support for magnet school construction, transportation and urban/suburban transfer costs. The state soon saw its overall strategy for achieving equity shift from emphasizing mandatory approaches to voluntary action, while maintaining strict standards in outcomes. Most urban parents, staff and superintendents enthusiastically adopted the idea of enhanced family choice as the basis for equity and integration as well as educational improvement.

MAGNET SCHOOLS

Magnet schools are institutions which specialize in students' particular interests. Specialities range from vocational and technical experience to training in the fine arts. Although magnet schools sometimes have independent admissions policies, they still fall into the category of schools of choice since attendance is not determined by residence and there is no tuition fee.

Magnet schools have been started in Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Pittsburgh with varying degrees of success. Pittsburgh's Superintendent of Public Schools, Dr. Richard Wallace Jr., has

developed one of the nation's finest magnet school programs, while at the same time maintaining high standards of education. The media has reported accounts of parents standing in line for days to register their children for the magnet school programs.

One of Pittsburgh's successful magnet schools is the former Schenley High School. Schenley was known only for winning basketball championships, until John Young became principal in 1980. Young cracked down on student absenteeism and in 1983 turned Schenley into a magnet for international studies and high technologies and opened it as a teacher's center. In 1987, Schenley was picked as one of the three western Pennsylvania schools of excellence by the U.S. Department of Education.[8]

Schenley has also helped achieve racial balance. As the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* has reported, "In 1980, when Young became principal, total enrollment was 893 students, of which 751, or 86 percent, were black. This year, enrollment is up to 1,089 students and 705, or 65 percent, are black."[9]

While magnet schools certainly have achieved positive results in some cities, they should not be seen as the only answer to public school problems, but rather as one part of an overall solution. Magnet schools have been criticized for being merely a desegregation tool, for being "elitist", and for being comparable to "free private schools" because of the entrance exams needed for acceptance. In some instances these criticisms have been justified. Magnet schools should not be promoted by superintendents at the expense of other schools and services within their districts. One way to avoid the problem is to use magnet schools as a starting point in opening up the entire public school system to choice.

EXAMPLES OF OTHER STATES

Various forms of public schools of choice are being implemented nationwide. The following is a list of choice developments in the United States.[10]

Arizona. A 1986 law allows 11th and 12th graders to attend post-secondary institutions. In 1990, legislation has been introduced in the House, which would allow students to enroll in any school district regardless of where they live.

Arkansas. Governor Clinton signed into law a Post-Secondary Options and Kindergarten through 12th grade open enrollment plan.

California. The state board adopted a law in 1986 permitting parents of elementary students to choose between their resident and work districts, as long as desegregation efforts are not harmed. As of 1990, three bills have been introduced in the California legislature, which address open enrollment options.

Colorado. Eleventh and 12th graders can attend colleges and universities. Legislation has been introduced which would create the "Colorado Public Schools of Choice Act of 1990" which provides for intraschool district choice plans.

Florida. High school students are allowed to take courses at community colleges. In 1990, legislation has been introduced which would allow economically disadvantaged children to

attend a public or approved private school within the county in which the family resides.

Georgia. In 1989 a bill was signed into law by the Governor which authorizes the Board of Education of Dougherty County to exercise powers relative to the transfer of those students who wish to attend schools in districts other than their own. Also, a bill has been introduced to create a House Study Committee on School District Enrollment Options Program.

Hawaii. In 1990, three bills have been introduced relating to open enrollment.

Idaho. A law establishing open enrollment options within Idaho school districts was signed by Governor Cecil Andrus.

Illinois. Chicago school districts are required to expand options for all students within the next several years. Also four different bills have been introduced before the Illinois legislature dealing specifically with Open Enrollment Options.

Iowa. A 1987 law allows families to send students to public schools in their own or adjacent districts if a different academic program is available.

Maine. The state passed a Post Secondary Options law in 1987 modeled after Minnesota's program.

Massachusetts. The state provides funds to help individual districts offer choice within the public school system, and assists some inter-district programs which link several cities with their suburbs. In 1988, the legislature passed a bill allowing movement between cities and their suburbs without racial balance guidelines. The Governor vetoed the bill and asked the Department of Education to develop a new pilot plan.

Michigan. Two bills have been introduced in the legislature. One bill would require electors in certain circumstances to vote on whether they favor schools of choice. The other bill provides for schools of choice within intermediate school districts.

Mississippi. In 1988 the state opened up a statewide math and science magnet school. A bill which would create educational enterprise zones has been introduced in 1990.

Nebraska. In 1989 Governor Kay Orr signed into law a bill providing for open enrollment.

New Hampshire. A bill has been introduced which would allow parents of students grades K-12 to choose which public school they will attend.

New York. The state provides funds to help local districts develop public schools of choice programs.

North Carolina. The state has two statewide magnet programs, one for arts and one for math and science.

Oklahoma. Bills have been introduced in both the House and the Senate which would create the Parental Choice Act, providing for open enrollment.

South Carolina. A bill has been introduced in the House which would authorize a pupil to attend a public school in a district other than the one which he or she resides under certain restrictions, conditions, and limitations.

Tennessee. Bills have been introduced in both the Senate and the House which would enact the Enrollment Options Act.

Utah. A bill was signed into law in 1990 which requires the State Board of Education to establish an options program to enable students residing in the state to attend public school districts other than the ones in which they reside.

Virginia. The state established several regional magnet programs emphasizing math and science.

Washington. In 1990, a bill was signed into law which provides for open enrollment options programs.

Wisconsin. In 1990 a law was passed which requires the state to pay for certain pupils who reside in a first class city who are members of families with incomes not to exceed 1.75 times the federal poverty level to attend a non sectarian private school.

COSTS AND OTHER CONCERNS

The cost of funding public schools of choice obviously depends on the size and scope of the program. In Minnesota, up to $4,000 in state aid can follow a student who chooses to enroll in another school district.[11] Milwaukee, Wisconsin has a double-tiered finance system where neither the city nor the receiving suburb loses money if they participate.[12] In cases where parents are expected to assume the inter-district transportation costs, virtually no costs are involved.

Should Pennsylvania consider introducing schools of choice, the question of what impact it would have on the Equalized Subsidy for Basic Education (ESBE, the formula used by the state that distributes state aid to the state's 501 school districts) will inevitably arise. It is difficult at this time to determine the impact, partially because it is not known how choice would factor into the complicated ESBE formula and it is not known what type of choice program would be developed. Nonetheless, it is logical to assume that public schools doing a good job at educating children would be financially better off than schools that provide substandard education because money would follow students.

Officials in Minnesota have said that their system will force school districts to improve or in the most extreme cases, die for lack of funds.[13] For Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich, this presents little concern. He defends the state's schools of choice program as "market forces at work."[14] Former United States Secretary of Education, William Bennett, when asked about schools closing from lack of funds and support replied, "So, give them a funeral." These are harsh words indeed, but as the Secretary added: "No one gives a funeral to the kids who are dropping out of those bad schools, and maybe life itself."[15]

Other concerns have been voiced regarding the possible negative implications that public schools of choice may have on the education establishment and teaching profession.

Racial Integration. There is a fear among some that schools of choice will result in a mass exodus of minority students from urban school districts to suburban schools, introducing new racial strains in suburban neighborhoods. A related concern is that the racial balance that downtown urban schools have been trying to achieve may be disrupted. However, steps can be taken to ensure that racial integration goals are not disturbed, such as making certain that an effective assignment policy is in place.

If the lessons of forced busing have taught us anything, it is that racial integration is difficult to achieve through compulsion. More effective methods rely on positive incentives, such as providing schools that attract students. For example, schools of choice in the Bronx are attracting white students from outside its neighborhoods because of the quality of education.[16]

Administratively Difficult To Manage. School administrators are justifiably concerned that a policy which permits students to cross into neighboring school districts may create an administrative burden. Indeed, the policy could result in the overcrowding of some schools and the closing down of others.

However, the point of schools of choice is that the decentralization of education and the introduction of competitive influences can improve long-term quality of education. Inefficiencies and disruption could be minimized by experimenting with choice programs through pilot projects, and by giving the education system time to identify administrative difficulties and design solutions.

The record seems to suggest that complications can be worked out. Administrative difficulties have been overcome in states such as Minnesota and Massachusetts where schools of choice have been implemented on a large scale. Obviously individual problems will require specific solutions. For example, Dr. Charles Glenn suggests the following approach for dealing with the problem schools might have in predicting school enrollment sizes: a school could specify the number of seats available in a particular school year well before the close of the preceding academic year and accept transfer students up to a cutoff limit. This could enable administrators to predict the need for teachers and other resources.[17]

The Impact On Teachers. Another fear is that choice could have a negative impact on teacher concerns such as contracts, tenure, classroom size and job security. There is no doubt that teachers will be affected by schools of choice, but the effect does not have to be negative.

Most teachers recognize that the image of their profession has sunk along with approval of the system's performance, and hence have much to gain by improvement. Viewing teachers as sources of potential innovation, and including them as partners in the process will minimize resistance. As Dr. Charles Glenn points out, "Teachers who are treated unfairly or fear that parental choice will undermine their position are not going to take the lead in making schools more diverse, more flavorful, more effective."[18]

By introducing a degree of competition into the public school system, teachers' expertise in curriculum formation and teaching techniques may be more highly valued. The teaching profession may be enhanced by an educational environment that is less bureaucratic and capable of

viewing every child as having unique interests and abilities. Choice lets teachers do what they do best — use their talents to train and bring the most out of young minds. Public schools of choice could actually help elevate teachers to the professional status they seek and deserve.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that the public school system needs to change. It has been five years since **A Nation at Risk** boldly detailed the dismal state of our public education system, yet today many of the same problems persist. The problem with public schools does not lie entirely with students or with teachers, but with a system that is too centralized and bureaucratic. Control of the public schools should be given back to those who are the closest to the schools — students, parents and local school boards.

Public schools of choice is one solution. It is neither a conservative idea, (Minnesota and Massachusetts, two states where public schools of choice has been the most successful, are not known as bastions of conservatism), nor is it a liberal idea. Support for the idea has been building among Republican and Democratic officials alike from all across the country.

Chester E. Finn, Jr., a former U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary, said, "Public schools of choice is an onrushing train."[19] If that is the case, then Pennsylvania should climb on board with the growing number of other states who are developing expanding choice programs. Public schools of choice can help ensure that our state's most precious resource, our children, are preparing to face the challenges and opportunities that await our Commonwealth as we approach the 21st Century.

ENDNOTES

[1]Charles Glenn, "Putting Choice to Work for Public Education," **Family Choice and Public Schools: A Report to the State Board of Education**, published by Massachusetts Department of Education, Quincy, Massachusetts, (January 1986): p. 7.

[2]Fred M. Hechinger, "About Education," **The New York Times**, (21 December, 1988): p. B9.

[3]Edward B. Fiske, "Parental Choice in Public Schools Gains," **The New York Times**, (11 July, 1988): p. B6.

[4]Joe Nathan, "Minnesota Studies Show Encouraging Results," a synopsis of laws expanding educator and parental choice among public schools, published by Spring Hill Center, Wayzata, Minnesota. Also, Minnesota Department of Education, compilation of education initiatives, St. Paul, Minnesota, (August, 1988).

[5]Governor Michael S. Dukakis, letter to the Massachusetts Department of Education, Boston, Massachusetts, (17 July, 1988).

[6]Fiske, p. B6.

[7]Glenn,**Family Choice and Public Schools**, p. 24.

[8]Carole Patton Smith, "It's 'Cool to be Smart' Now at Schenley High School," **Pittsburgh Post Gazette**, (15 February, 1988): p. 1.

[9]Smith, p. 4.

[10]Joe Nathan, "Expanding Choice Among Public Schools: A Brief National Update," synopses of state laws, published by Spring Hill Center, Wayzata, Minnesota, (October, 1988), and American Legislative Exchange Council, "Education Reform State Legislative Report," **Legislative Update**, Washington D.C. (April 2, 1989), pp. 3-11.

[11]Connie Leslie et al., "Giving Parents a Choice," **Newsweek**, (19 September, 1988): p. 77.

[12]Priscilla Van Tassel, "State Weighs Open-Choice Schooling," **The New York Times**, (13 March, 1988): section 12, p. 1.

[13]Leslie et al., p. 77.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Warren T. Brooks, "What Should an Education President Do?," a policy report published by the Independence Institute Research Network, Golden, Colorado, (1 May, 1988): p. 10.

[16]Richard Kraft, "Public Schools of Choice: Key to Colorado Education Reform," published by the Independence Institute, Golden, Colorado, (16 November, 1987):p. 4.

[17]Charles Glenn, "Putting School Choice in Place," **Background Papers on Parent Choice Among Public Schools**, Massachusetts Department of Education, Office of Educational Opportunity, Quincy, Massachusetts, (September, 1988): p. 33.

[18]Ibid., p. 30.

[19]Fiske, p. A1.1

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Pennsylvania's Great Garbage Pile Up: Developing Incentives for Recycling. Research Analyst Keith Basehore emphasizes that recycling is one of the answers to Pennsylvania's solid waste problem. He states that an effective recycling program must concentrate on both the supply and demand side of recyclable products and that tax incentives and credits are the key to providing a market for recyclable materials. (7/90)

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